

A HOUSE DIVIDED, A HOUSE RESTORED

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***"And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."***

William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5

I have in recent months become increasingly aware of a growing hostility expressed towards Pope Francis by a number of individuals and fundamentalist Catholic groups who remain ideologically opposed to the reforms carried out after Vatican II during the 1960s. I have found this perplexing, particularly in view of the fact that Pope Francis is a man who is deeply aware both of human reality with all its strengths and weaknesses, and of the tenebrous future that confronts our planet and her peoples.

Before becoming vicar of Rome, Pope Francis had an intimate knowledge of life as it is lived by many at street level. Even during the early days of his priesthood, he lived in the midst of his communities. And in true Jesuitical spirit, Fr Jorge Bergoglio went native - to use the language of sociologists - by choosing to work with those on the margins of society. He would often turn up in the slum districts of Buenos Aires unannounced and mingle freely with local people and local priests. When elected to the post of vicar-general of the Flores district in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s, he would often spend time on the back streets rather than in comfortable ecclesial bureaus. After becoming archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, Bergoglio dramatically increased the number of priests living and working in such communities. Journalist Nick Miller offers the following portrait:

"He was a frequent visitor to the villas miserias, the shanty towns, a place of dangling electricity cables and open sewers, and he sent his priests to work there in

unprecedented numbers. One of them, Padre Pepe, told [his biographer] that they spoke every week. 'He would show up by surprise . . . he felt comfortable here,' he said. 'He was trying to show that the slums were not just important for the people who live there, but for the whole Church.'"

Pope Francis has also been an energetic reformer in his dealings with corruption in the Church. During his time as vicar-general in Flores, he asked that church authorities reveal the extent of their property holdings. Jose Luis Mollaghan, a senior priest in charge of finances, tried to block his investigations. Soon after his investiture as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio summarily removed Mollaghan - together with another cleric who had opposed him - from their posts.

The matter did not end there. In 2005, Mollaghan was himself appointed archbishop of Rosario in central Argentina, but in 2013 came under investigation for mismanaging church funds. In May 2014, Pope Francis stripped his old adversary of his role as archbishop and moved him to Rome, appointing him to a commission tasked with investigating priests involved in the sexual abuse of children. It would seem that in the spirit of his new homeland, Pope Francis made a point of keeping his friends close, but his enemies closer.

A Particular Style

The preferred style of the pontificate of Pope Francis was evident from the start. On his election to the papacy in March 2013, he did not take his seat on the papal throne but chose rather to talk and mingle with his cardinals. When it was time for them all to return to their lodgings, he travelled with them in a bus rather than in the appointed limousine. He chose not to wear the traditional red papal slippers that were presented to him but remained in his street-scuffed and road-worn black leather shoes. When he was ushered into the papal apartments for the first time, he exclaimed, "There's enough room for 300 people here! I don't need all this space", and returned to his small apartment. Three days later, he confided to a group of journalists, "How I wish for a church of the poor, and that the church were poor."

When Pope Francis celebrated his first public mass in the Vatican at St Anna's church a few days later, he wore the same simple surplice as that worn by parish priests throughout the world. At the end of the mass, he met with members of his congregation outside the church as priests do everywhere. His message during that first mass confirmed the soft radicalism that has become his signatory style:

"We . . . are the people who, on the one hand want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. And Jesus has this message for us: Mercy. I think, and I say it with humility, that this is the Lord's most powerful message: Mercy. It was he himself who said: 'I did not come for the righteous.' The righteous justify themselves. Go on, then, even if you can do it, I cannot! But they believe they can."

His broader mission to extend the church's social doctrine was made more explicit soon after. A month after assuming the papal mantle, Pope Francis met with Rafael Correa, the president of Ecuador. Invoking his namesake, he said, "Take good care of

creation. St Francis wanted that. People occasionally forgive, but nature never does. If we don't take care of the environment, there's no way of getting around it."



Two years later, Pope Francis published his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si. On Care for our Common Home*. This timely document offers a detailed reflection on the escalating crises facing present and future generations due to climate change and humanly mediated ecosystem destruction. Unlike papal encyclicals generally, *Laudato Si* is directed to all

peoples and not just the church hierarchy and lay faithful:

"I urgently appeal then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation that includes everyone, since the environment challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all." (# 14)

In contrast to his predecessors, Pope Francis has a coherent understanding of the centrality of global capitalism in creating the conditions that have brought the planet to such a perilous edge. This may be one of the fruits of witnessing at close range the struggles of many Central and South America countries against corporate and political interference from imperial powers during the 1970s and 1980s. The recent beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered by a death squad affiliated with big money and the El Salvador military while he was celebrating mass further attests to the determination of Pope Francis to reposition the church into the midst of its poorest and least powerful members.

By its very nature, *Laudato Si* is not a political manifesto addressing the changes needed to minimise environmental destruction or of mitigating the effects of climate change. Rather, it expresses a deeply holistic view of the fields of influence that have overtaken the past century with such devastating consequence. According to ethicist and theologian Russell Hittinger, Pope Francis understands deeply that global capitalism and corporate power have become a world system and that, "the familiar institutions of our life [have become] empty shells of technocracy in the service of money." Pope Francis reflects in *Laudato Si*:

"We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups." (# 107)

It is not simply a matter of creating new technologies or replacing energy sources. The crisis that confronts us all is yet another manifestation of a derailment and a derangement of our sense of ourselves and each other and a reflection of our collective abandonment of such simple virtues as benevolence, solidarity, fairness, and sensitivity to the hidden consequences of our actions. Before there can be any healing of the earth and of her people, we need to be awakened to the love that has given birth to all things, seen and unseen. Again, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*:

"It is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life." (# 202)

The Softer Side

Pope Francis has carried the seemingly contradictory dimensions of realism and transcendence, reason and revelation, and empiricism and faith into his papacy. While dealing with the "real" world and all its corruptions, abuses, and institutionalised rigidities, he has maintained deep fidelity both to the sources from which his own Catholicism has sprung, and to the ongoing historic manifestations whereby it is perennially sustained. Contrary to the suggestions of certain observers, Pope Francis is no quasi-secular hero come to sort out all the silly superstitions and anachronisms in which Roman Catholicism is steeped. Over and above all else, he is a Jesuit, a member of the Society of Jesus, one irrevocably formed by Ignatian training in memory, hope and discernment. And he bears the full history of the church with all its wounds and all its powers in his person. This is evidenced in his acknowledgement of and participation in realities that the modernist temper prefers to ignore, if not deny outright.



A short four months after he was elected, Pope Francis consecrated the Vatican to St Michael in a garden ceremony held on July 5th 2013. St Michael had figured prominently in the life of the church until the reforms of Vatican II. This was due largely to the influence of Pope Leo XIII who in 1884 experienced a visionary encounter between Satan and Jesus in which he heard Satan boasting that he could destroy the church within a century if given enough power and freedom. A softly spoken voice replied: "You have the time. You will have the power. Do with them what you will." Pope Leo immediately retreated into his study and emerged soon after with a newly composed hand-written prayer to St Michael. He passed

it on to his secretary with instructions that it was to be universally distributed and read thereafter in every Catholic Church after the celebration of each mass. The prayer fell out of favour after Vatican II though it continues to be part of the private devotions of many Catholics.

The act of consecrating the Vatican to St Michael by Pope Francis represents an act of invocation of the great prince of angels in order to protect the Vatican City state and all who live and work in it from corrupted and corrupting influences. In earlier informal discussions with Latin American clerics, Francis had spoken forthrightly about a "stream of corruption" within the Vatican Curia. During the consecration ceremony itself, he said: "In consecrating the Vatican City State to St Michael the Archangel, I ask him to defend us from the evil one and banish him." Though many

may consider this to have been a quaint, archaic and largely symbolic ritual, it reflects the complete acceptance by Pope Francis that there are powers at work in the world that defy rational comprehension.

St Michael himself has a long history of manifestation within the Catholic tradition. The Cave of St Michael at Monte Gargano was often visited by Padre Pio of Pietrelcina who - together with St Francis several centuries before him - viewed it as a place of transformative spiritual power. In October 2013, a few months after the consecration ceremony in the Vatican, a painting of St Michael situated in a funerary chapel on the island of Rhodes began to secrete tears from its eyes. All the usual tests were conducted and it was concluded that the image of the eyes in the painting had not been interfered with in any way and that it did, in fact, mysteriously exude a tear-like fluid. Even after the painting of St Michael had been transferred from the funerary chapel to the main church in Ialysos nearby, it continued to weep.

Re-invoking the Presences

Canadian philosopher and author of *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has declared that, "We are no longer dealing with a real presence. We can now only speak of an act as symbolic." As with most overarching generalisations, this simply does not hold true in all circumstances or for all individuals. There are some whose experience is otherwise. This is certainly the case with Pope Francis and his invocation of St Michael to protect the Vatican. And it is equally the case in the curious enigma of the Portuguese Catholic mystic Alexandrina da Costa who lived ecstatically for a period of over 13 years solely on a single daily consecrated Eucharistic wafer. Throughout that time, she neither drank a drop of water nor consumed a morsel of food.

Such phenomena have occurred throughout history and will doubtless continue to occur despite the protestations of militant rationalists. They are a verifiable part of human experience and are integral to the deeper human story. They cannot be simply swept aside because they do not conform to a certain view of how the world must be. European Christianity carries numerous such stories in its long and often contradictory history. These manifestations bespeak the uncomfortable-for-some but nonetheless fully evidenced reality that the world is infused with energies and graced by phenomena that lie well outside the prescriptive domains of scientific naturalism. And this understanding is integral to the world inhabited by Pope Francis.

One of the great treasures held within the heart of Italian Catholic spirituality is the mystery of the regular and repeated liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro (St Januarius) three times each year at the Cathedral of Naples. According to tradition, the blood was collected after the martyrdom by beheading of San Gennaro during the reign of Diocletian. Since the late 14th century, several times a year the blood which is stored in a vial mysteriously transforms from a dark, coagulated mass into a labile and liquid state.

On March 21st 2015, Pope Francis visited the Cathedral of Naples to address a large gathering which included many priests and nuns. The reliquary containing the solidified blood of San Gennaro was brought to the altar for the occasion. After putting aside his prepared notes and delivering an extemporised address, Pope Francis

kissed and later blessed the crowd with the reliquary. Much to the surprise of everyone present, the blood began to liquefy. Pope Francis was not at all perturbed by what had happened even though it had been more than 150 years since the blood of San Gennaro had actually liquefied in the presence of any pope. With gentle humour, he used the occasion to urge those present to strive more fully in the exercise of their faith and the honouring of their church.

It is clear that Pope Francis has his feet planted equally firmly in both the physical world with all its difficulties and contentions, and in the world of divine presences that are capable of irrupting gently - and sometimes not-so-gently - into human experience.

Three months after he had consecrated the Vatican to the protection of St Michael, Pope Francis welcomed a small statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. At his specific request, the statuette had been transported to the Vatican from Fatima in Portugal, where it usually resides. A dedication ceremony was performed in the presence of the statue on October 13th 2013, the anniversary of the final apparition of Mary to three children in a field near Fatima in 1917. This was in fact part of a conscious sequence initiated by the pope in the days immediately following his election to the papacy.

It is common knowledge that Pope Francis has for many decades been intensely devoted to Mary, the mother of Jesus. He prays the rosary three times each day and has encouraged Marian devotion among his congregations. Within hours of his election as pope in March 2013, he approached Cardinal Jose da Cruz Policarpo of Lisbon and made a special request that his pontificate be consecrated to Our Lady of Fatima. This was accomplished two months later after a mass at the Fatima Shrine on May 13th, the 96th anniversary of the day on which the Blessed Virgin first appeared to the three children at *Cova da Iria* in Fatima.



It is no surprise that Pope Francis brought this process to deeper fulfilment exactly five months later by bringing the most celebrated Marian icon in Catholicism to the Vatican and using the occasion to consecrate the world to her care. October 13th 1917 was the day on which, true to her promise, the Blessed Virgin gave a sign of her living presence at Fatima by manifesting the Miracle of the Sun, which was witnessed by over 70,000 people who had gathered at the cove and by many others who lived nearby or were travelling through the area at the time. There are many aspects regarding the manifestations at Fatima - all of which are on the public record - that give pause to the notion that the possibilities within human experience can be fully circumscribed by the laws that govern physics and the material universe or by genetic determinism.

The phenomenon of Fatima is central to Pope Francis's vision of both the future of the Church and the future of the world. In his role as pope, he has no doubt been fully briefed on the nature and the content of the prophecies of Fatima that have been serially delivered and variously interpreted over the decades. It is clear that Pope Francis has fully accepted the veracity of the events that occurred at Fatima in 1917.

It is also clear that he accords power and agency to manifestations of the divine as they have been expressed from the healings performed by Jesus 2,000 years ago to such contemporary irruptions of presence as occur at Lourdes, Fatima, Rhodes and the Cathedral of Naples among other places. Such phenomena all point to the fact that the story is far too complex to be fully encompassed by reductionist scientism, materialist philosophy, a dehumanised and dehumanising economic system, and the cynical opportunism that defines contemporary politics.

The declaration by Pope Francis of 2016 as the Year of Mercy, was an act of great hope and affirmation. Despite the seeming hopelessness of the times with its many wars, mass migrations of refugees, social and spiritual desolation, widespread inequality, and relentless environmental destruction, Pope Francis has called for an opening of the human heart to powers that reach deeper than anything we are ourselves capable of construing, and an awakening of the human will to ways of peace and mercy that begin within oneself and thereafter emanate through all our fields of influence.



***And if it be our fate
To feel the shudder and shake of crashing dreams
Let it be wrought of heaven and earth
And not of those who would call the close of day***

Mother, awake

Addendum

An on-line version of this article carrying hyperlinks to various sources (including the full text of *Laudato Si*), and three embedded videos depicting aspects of *Laudato Si*, the weeping image of St Michael in Rhodes, and the liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro in the presence of Pope Francis, can be accessed at:

<http://thehealingprojectweblog.blogspot.com.au/2017/03/a-house-divided-house-restored.html>